

Investigation

1.2: The Medical Support Team

We have identified many physician specialists who can make people feel better, but doctors can help more people with greater efficiency if they take advantage of support personnel. A receptionist, for example, who makes patient appointments obviously makes the process of office-based medicine more efficient. Similarly, nurses at various skill levels can make important observations and adjust treatments to improve outcomes. Technicians and therapists of various types can apply expert skills to gather diagnostic information and carry out treatment programs. The healthcare system probably has as many, or more, categories of non-physician providers as it has kinds of doctors. In fact, today, if we sent all the members of the medical support team on vacation, healthcare would come to a complete halt.

Medicine has traditionally put physicians at the top of the organizational chart as the prime movers of patient care. One can argue that role has shifted over time, and indeed probably needs to continue to shift. In hospitals doctors normally write orders that others carry out. Increasingly nurse practitioners and physician assistants, members of the support team, have the authority to write and modify orders on behalf of physicians. The traditional workflow appears to be changing in hospitals in other ways that benefit the patient. Increasingly hospitals are asking physicians to provide information and objectives to team members, in addition to prescriptions and orders. When all the members of the care team know the objective of the therapy, they each can add their considerable expertise to make the therapy more effective and more tolerant of errors. Non-physician members of the care team usually spend a great deal more time directly with the patient and thus can make observations the physician may not have had an opportunity to appreciate. When everyone on the care team knows the specific objectives of the treatment, the entire team becomes empowered to share ideas and tailor the therapy to the patient's advantage. The data now exists to show this works!

Patients need the talents of the entire spectrum of medical support team members to make the correct diagnosis and then take the necessary steps to return the patient to good health. If you think only physicians invest years of schooling to learn their skills, you would be mistaken. Many medical support careers require four or more years of college level training. A few roles may still require as little as six months of training, but the amount of schooling needed appears to increase steadily. Beyond the schooling, the proficient members of the health care team have thousands of hours of experience that has honed their clinical expertise. A physician may have a wider breadth of knowledge, but the other members of the team also have extensive, crucial depth of experience in their specific skills that allows them to contribute vital care to the sick and injured.

Below you will see a long list of medical care support roles. This list will not include them all, since new ones seem to constantly emerge as new medical tools and techniques evolve.

One of these support roles could describe a career path that would fit your skills, interests, and life goals. As you read the list you might recall the way that one of these professionals helped you or a member of your family.

Medical Support Team Members: Registered Nurse (RN), Nurse Practitioner, Physician Assistant, Pharmacist, Dental Hygienist, Massage Therapist, Surgical Technician, Phlebotomist, Optometrist, Optician, Licensed Vocational Nurse (LVN), Orthopedic Technician, Respiratory Therapist, Cardiology Technician, Medical Librarian, Radiology Technician, Ultrasound Technician, Occupational Therapist, Medical Records Clerk, Nuclear Medicine Technician, Medical Education Coordinator, Dental Assistant, Speech Therapist. Clinical Psychologist, Audiologist, Physical Therapist, and more.

You can easily find for yourself information on what each of these jobs involve and how one goes about preparing for such a career. As an example, if you searched for the role of an optometrist you would find this career path focuses specifically on the use of glasses, contact lenses, and even exercises used to correct vision. Optometrists overlap some of the services that Ophthalmologists provide, but optometrists do not perform eye surgery or treat eye infections. We do refer to optometrists using the title “Doctor” because they hold a Doctor of Optometry degree, a degree that differs from the degree Doctor of Medicine.

Physician Assistants get a college degree in a science field before attending a graduate program to become an assistant to a specific specialty of medicine. They then work under the supervision of a physician seeing patients, doing some therapy, and often assisting in medical procedures. Physician Assistants with experience often seem to work quite independently and have proven a valuable means to provide healthcare to underserved locations in our nation. This use of Physician Assistants has grown now that we have communication capabilities that allow rapid communication of images and conversations that can allow such a physician assistant to become the eyes and hands of a physician physically located miles away.

Nurse Practitioners or Advanced Practice Nurses start by becoming nurses and then take more advanced training in specific areas of medical practice to also work closely with physicians seeing patients and performing therapy appropriate to their skills and experience. They also have played a vital role in extending high quality healthcare to more people across our nation.

Investigation 1.2B

1.2B: Medical Support Team Referrals

Physicians diagnose the problem causing the patient's complaint often using observation and data generated by the other members of the team. The doctor then decides which treatments appear to offer the most help to the patient. Since doctors may not have the time or specific experience necessary to administer many treatments personally, they often **refer** the patient to a member of the **Medical Support Team**, who directly performs the treatments on an appropriate schedule.

Physical Therapists represent a prime example of this support team relationship. Physical Therapists study the anatomy of bones and muscles, along with the use of physical means to restore function. They then use their training, knowledge, and experience to guide patients to a speedy recovery from injury or surgery. Patients with a variety of conditions that can benefit from exercise, stretching, and physical treatments, to include heat, icing, whirlpool, all go to physical therapy. Often, physical therapists actually go to the patient where they live to help them regain strength and movement after an injury or after surgery.

If you have a sore throat with a cough and green phlegm, the doctor might write a prescription for antibiotic pills. Physicians do not keep a supply of all the medicines they prescribe in their office. Instead they send you to a member of the support team who has shelves of medications in a variety of dosage forms. The **Pharmacist** at the drug store knows about potential **interactions** between prescription medicines, and has expertise in explaining exactly how the patient can derive the greatest benefit from his or her medications. Pharmacists in the hospital provide a similar vital role in patient care and commonly accompany physicians as they see patients in the hospital to help adjust complex regimens of medications.

Suppose YOU are a Family Practitioner. Read each of these case descriptions and decide what member of the medical support staff you or another practitioner might call upon to help care for the patient. You can see the author's suggested answers at the bottom of the page.

- (1) An 11-year-old female fell on her right wrist playing soccer. She felt immediate pain in the area and came to you for evaluation and treatment. An x-ray showed a small fracture, or break, in one of the bones of her wrist. She was placed in a cast for six weeks and the cast removed. Another x-ray showed the fracture healing well. The girl complained that her wrist remained stiff and weak. Who might help with this situation?

- (2) A 19-year old male visits your office with a complaint of bad breath. You ask him if he has seen a dentist in the past year and he says, "No". When you peer into his mouth you notice a small amount of redness (erythema) in his gums. You recommend a visit to a dentist as soon as possible. The Dentist examines his teeth and notes small pieces of rotten food between some of his teeth in addition to the erythema in his gum tissue. He finds no cavities. Who would the Dentist refer this patient to for treatment?
- (3) A 63-year-old female presents with a complaint that her husband always accuses her of saying "What did you say?" "He thinks I can't hear him when he speaks, but I think he mumbles." You perform a simple hearing test and observe that her hearing appears diminished in her left ear. You examine her for excess ear wax and find none. At this point you might consider referring this lady for further evaluation, but to whom would she go?
- (4) A 62-year-old male has been your patient for many years. About four months ago he suffered a stroke which left him with great difficulty speaking. You believe he might regain some of his speaking skills. Which medical support team member might help him?
- (5) You have admitted a 73-year-old male smoker to the hospital with difficulty breathing. Because he smoked for over 50 years you diagnosed emphysema. When you listen to the sounds coming from his lungs using your stethoscope you hear sounds consistent with pneumonia. Which medical support team member would you call to help this patient manage expelling the mucous in his lungs while he receives antibiotics for his infection?
- (6) A 51-year-old male sees you complaining of intermittent chest pain, which comes on when he exercises significantly. At this moment, his chest does not hurt. Your testing machine is broken, so you refer him to the hospital to have an EKG test. Which member of the hospital support team would most likely perform this test on your patient?
- (7) A 39-year-old female has recently returned from a trip to Africa. She complains of intermittent fever and chills, and a lack of appetite. You want to know more about the current diseases occurring in Africa. Which member of the support team could help you find the information so you can know the most likely diseases this patient might have contracted?
- (8) A 24-year-old pregnant female wants to determine the sex of her unborn baby. Which member of the support team could perform an ultrasound test that might yield that information?

1-Physical Therapist, 2-Dental hygienist, 3-Audiologist, 4-Speech Therapist, 5-Respiratory Therapist, 6-Cardiology Technician, 7-Medical Librarian, 8-Ultrasound Technician

In the last section, we ended our discussion by deciding that the task of picking a career seems overwhelming. Then we were looking only at the vast number of types of physicians. Now we have added even more careers in which people use their minds and hands every day to make the lives of others richer. If you ask a person working in any one of these

career choices how they selected that specific career, you will likely hear them talk about a specific experience or a specific individual that pointed them in the direction they elected. Your personal experiences will probably play that same role, especially when you keep an open mind and take the initiative to ask people about their career when you see them doing something you find interesting.